



Image, Language, and Subjectivity in Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*

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"Let's just say you're not quite there" (qtd. in Samantha Ellis' *Beckett's Play at the Old Vic, April 7, 1964*), the Beckettian subject is often read along the 3 lines of this response offered by the playwright to one of his famous actresses, Billy Whitelaw, on her enquiry about the relative nature of her character in *Footfalls*. Coming across as a hypothesis on the metaphysics of existence, the statement indicates towards a probable mode of being. It foregrounds a possibility in light of which a person can be said to be existing. While the remark can be thought of as negating presence to suggest an absence, it can also be read as one pointing at a lack that prevents a certain 'fullness' of the presence. Thereby, allowing for an investigation into the manner and the nature of existence.

The stated theoretical approach can be metamorphosed to bring into account the idea of representation in *Krapp's Last Tape*. What does one mean by representation and how does the notion manifest itself in the text? These are some of the questions that arise as one reads the play. This paper deals with the ideas by directing its attention towards the constitution of the text. In its length, *Krapp's Last Tape* presents the protagonist Krapp, his dialogues, the utterances of the tape, and an abundance of stage directions. Since the play is a performance meant to be staged, the directions occupy a large part of the text. However, it is not the concern of this paper to deal with the technicalities of the interplay of textual and performative attribute but to study the language and images which effectively guide the reading process. While the conception of the character cannot be completely divorced from an engagement with the conceptual dimensions of theatrical experience, the paper intends to restrict its focus on the various parameters that the reading of such a text readily involve. The concern of the paper is to read the Beckettian subject along the lines of the concepts like image, language, and subjectivity. Neither of these three aspects exist in complete isolation in regard to the text. *Krapp's Last Tape* is, more than anything, a series of images presented through language. In its function, the image goes beyond language and the

suppression that the latter causes. It makes visible and tangible that which is abstract and abstruse. The Beckettian subject expresses itself in and through image. Therefore, it is image and not language which explains the subjectivity of a character like Krapp.

Before encountering Krapp's own utterances, the readers are provided with a description of the setting leading to an elaborate account of the protagonist's demeanor. The play begins on "A late evening in the future" presenting Krapp in an undersized "rusty black narrow trousers" and a "surprising pair of dirty white boots" (Beckett 9). He is characterized as one who is "hard of hearing," short-sighted but unspectacled. He has "disordered grey hair" and a "cracked voice"¹ (9–10). On his each birthday, he habitually records and listens to certain consciously taped events of his life. As the play opens he is found looking for a specific "Box three, spool five" (13). The spool that he plays informs us of a much younger Krapp "separating the grain from the husks" i.e. accumulating the "things worth having" when all the "dust has settled" (15).

To his readers, Krapp comes forth as a solitary figure, as one who appears incomplete because he lacks wholesomeness. He is too big for his trousers for they are unable to contain him adequately. His voice is not "strong" and "pompous" but rather "cracked." Figuratively, his condition is like that of his monologues for both are fragmented and disjuncted entities. His pauses, silence, and hesitation function like ellipsis in indicating occlusion and intentional suppression of thoughts, words, and ideas. The construction of the monologue as an incoherent narrative marked with multiple fragments and gaps comments on the way in which Krapp is presented in the play. The form is also suggestive of the manner in which the playwright consolidates Krapp's entire being by putting together selective fragments from his past which interact with his present so that neither his past nor the present self can be seen in isolation.

The concise directions enable the reader to construct Krapp in a particular manner. Each direction can be conceived as an image which does not simply facilitate comprehension by the process of association, like relating a word with a picture, but also helps us endow Krapp with

¹Note how the quotes urge the reader to visualize the words and see them as images of a kind. The mention of colours, expressions, and attributes stimulates a process of image-making in the reader's mind such that each image comes alive in the consciousness of the reader and enables the construction of the character within the mind of the reader. The shift from the words on page to the image in the consciousness is crucial to the idea of representation in the paper.

consciousness and bring him to life in form of the mental image. The mental image, according to Sartre, is “the consciousness” of a thing as an image or “the imaginative consciousness” of the thing. Such a consciousness helps the reader to not only acknowledge the presence of the object but also enables him to perceive it in ways other than the usual. In the process the reader constructs an ‘idea’ of Krapp. To have an idea of Krapp is to have him in one’s consciousness. The image, however, not only belongs to the consciousness but attains a consciousness of its own because Krapp is no more entailed within language or by the words on page but is contained in the interstitial spaces of silence and occlusions in the play.

We have indicated above that Krapp’s being is not holistically present in the materiality of language but in the immateriality of the ‘mental’ image (the image in the consciousness). It is because the mere presence of language takes away any possibility of there not being any substance in Krapp’s life. While the language harps on expression, it is the image which provides room for ‘expressionlessness.’ The latter allows the unusual and the inexplicable (namely stasis and silence) to exist and surface spontaneously. In her article entitled “Literatures Silence (Samuel Beckett Versus the Word),” Faena Aleph suggests that by resorting to silence, Beckett attempts to avoid “the vain proliferation of the word.” She states that for him “the word” is the “stauncest enemy.” Like many Post-War writers and artists, Beckett’s disbelief in language owes to the fact that language proves inadequate to convey the predicament of the modern man, his traumatic experiences and lack of substance in life. Therefore, the playwright uses images and incorporates the ‘visual’ to amplify abstraction and make the underlying absurdity visible to the reader’s eye.

In technical terms, an image emphatically asserts the presence of an object and functions as its symbol. It conveys the obvious denotation but in the process makes other denotations possible. To this effect, John Lutterbie writes in “Subjects of Silence” that “The image is resonant as the site of gestation, of creation and transformation” (Lutterbie 473). The image functions through non-relation and encourages new interpretations by which it transcends the function of the linguistic sign. All in all, an image is denotational, metaphorical, and referential in its expression (Goodman 95). In the essay, “Levels of Imagery and Visual Expression,” Vija B. Lusebrink traces the various levels through which a mental image progresses and delineates

the visual expressions that each level entails.² The image culled out of language belongs to the “referential level” wherein it is “formed in response to concrete words” (Lusebrink 36). In the next stage the image conveys the “associative meaning” wherein it acts as a counterpart for the linguistic sign. The third level, which is the level of cognitive function, is integral to the argument of the paper as it “...bring[s] out the abstract aspects of images representing the underlying structures” which may include “input from other modalities” (Lusebrink 36–7). The cognitive level is important because it suggests the possibility of new meanings and stands for a higher level of denotation that goes beyond linguistic description. As an illustration, consider Krapp’s acts of brooding, peering, or “staring vacuously” while “remaining motionless.” It is understandable that these acts are not just physical demonstrations but potential indicators of the condition of mind. Dan Zahavi rightly writes in the “Subjectivity and the First-Person Perspective” that “Expression is more than simply a bridge supposed to close the gap between inner mental states and eternal bodily behavior... Expressive behavior reveals the mind to us” (Zahavi 74). The reader is thus pushed to think what Krapp broods on, peers at, and is puzzled by, and why at all does he behave in an absurd manner.

On another level, these gestures problematize the understanding of the notions of temporality and subjectivity that feature in the play. In being designated as a symbol, the image is converted into a site of possibility and meaning making. Here, the image can be said to have the properties of “Secondness” suggested by Charles Sanders Peirce in his work on semiotics. As put by Laura U. Marks in her essay, “Signs of the Time: Deleuze, Peirce, and the Documentary Image”:

Semiotics terms associated with Secondness are the sign itself, namely...the relation of the sign to its object, which is *indexical*, that is, the sign denotes the object through an existential connection to it; and how the interpreting represents the sign as a *dicisign*,³ a sign of possibility. It is [here]...that qualities become attributes of objects and events, which are

²The sudden shift in the vocabulary from ‘image’ to ‘mental image’ in the given context is to convey that the latter has the quoted properties of the former even though it is conceived in the mind. What is crucial here are the levels of image processing and meaning making that are common to both.

³‘Dicisign,’ a term used by Charles Sanders Peirce in his Semiotic Theory, is a sign which is not necessarily linguistic or linguistically structured but has the capability to function as a truth-bearer by itself.

perceived in their individuality and in opposition to everything else. This we might term the realm of the real. (Marks 197, emphasis in original)

While discussing the various levels of mental imagery previously, it has been mentioned that the visual expression has various levels where each level assumes a particular function in facilitating comprehension of meaning. There too, a trajectory had been traced from the denotative aspect of the image or the “indexical” attribute to the cognitive function which flourishes within and beyond the “sign of possibility.” Here, not only is the object attributed with definite qualities but is also put out to acquire layers through suggestion and implication.

In the play Krapp creates and recreates images. He “recalls” his past selves by imagining them. The images evoked through the spools are depicted in a certain fashion. There is “an old ledger” in which all the entries are catalogued. The specific entry of the box three spool five reads as following: “Mother at rest at last...The black ball...(He raises his head, stares blankly front. Puzzled.) Black ball?... (He peers again at ledger, reads) The dark nurse... (He raises his head, broods, peers again at ledger, reads)” (Beckett 13). The main tenets of the spool are written denotatively. The images that they point at—“the black ball” and “the dark nurse”—have for their referents, a ball black in colour and a nurse dark in complexion, seen by Krapp at some point in time. However, the indexical nature of the reference goes beyond the given context into a more complex sphere. The images are not mere referents here. The dramatic turning of “The black ball” into “Black ball?” marks a crucial displacement. It can be read as a parallel to the shift which highlights a break in the relation of sign and its referent. The transformation of an objective phrase into an expressive one invites an insight into the subjectivity of the character. The image of the black ball, even before the tape introduces it, is indicative in nature. The incoherent form of the quote restrains formulation of a proper context. Each phrase that translates into an image is decontextualized and gives rise to new connotations. For instance, the word ‘black’ and ‘dark’ disassociate themselves from ‘ball’ and ‘nurse,’ respectively, to imply darkness—a reference which might not directly relate with the words that follow but serve other purposes in the text.

Beckett extensively employs the imagery of light, darkness, and colors like black and white. One of the ideas to which these images relate to is the subjectivity of the character. The employment of

light and darkness (especially in the movement of Krapp from his desk which is placed in light to the darkness of the backstage) and numerous other images like “Memorable equinox,” day-night, etc., add to the density of the play. It is noticeable that Krapp is more active in the dark where he “goes with all the speed” than in the light at his desk where he is, for the most part, listening to the tape and passively staring or brooding. The constant movement between the two spaces reflects the existential crisis that Krapp goes through. Charles R. Lyons considers it to be a representation of “...a conflict between antithetical desires: to lose the self in darkness and to confront the self in the light” (Lyons 101). It is true that Krapp “...love[s] to get up and move about in it (darkness), then back here to...(hesitates)...me (pause) Krapp” (Beckett 15). While the imagery makes visible the dilemma of the modern man and his distancing from the self, it knits with itself the notions of time and temporality.

In *Phenomenology and the Future of Film, Rethinking Subjectivity beyond French Cinema*, Jenny Chamarette opines that “...the very possibility of thought is governed by an attentiveness towards, and a presence to, time. Presence to temporalities – to an event, a moment, a duration – is a precondition for sensation, experience, and knowledge...” (22). It suggests that subjective experiences cannot make sense if they are not aligned with respect to time and temporality. It informs that our “presence” needs to be always manifested in time. It can only have meaning when it is embedded in these notions. We are always subjected to time and yet there remains a scope for giving it a form because “Time is a condition of possibility for subjectivity, but subjectivity is also a condition of possibility for forms of time” (Chamarette 24). The linear flow of time, i.e. its movement from past to present and from present to future, can be altered through memory, imagination, dreams, hallucinations, etc. The subjective experiences enable us to decipher time and mold it. The “imagine[d]” events of the bygone year help Krapp in “...embarking on a new...retrospect” (Beckett 16). Since the internal domain of imagination is not governed by the linear flow of time, the events put together present neither a linearity of occurrence nor a proper context. Nonetheless, they are a part of Krapp’s retrospect which help him take on new prospects. Interestingly, majority of the events are recorded in the present tense, so that even though they belong to the past they assume a character of being present in the present of the protagonist. Krapp’s act of listening to the spools of tape has often been read as a search for self. Though the present Krapp has nothing substantial to record from his recent past, he wants to “Be again,” that is, be the self he once was. The revocation of the past is a

conscious act springing from the realization that the present as well as the present self no longer hold significance.

Time, one of the notable images which materializes in the length of the play, not only gives shape to Krapp's existence but arrests the very existence that it sets out to frame. It makes itself tangible in form of the tapes. The episodes that the tapes present trace the movement of the subject in time and space. That the recordings have a significance for the speaker is clear from the grain-husk metaphor. They are meant to enable Krapp to move forward in life. However, instead of witnessing any progression through them, he encounters absolute stasis. The little movement that does happen hurries itself into a state of suspension. So, the events on the tapes which were meant to stimulate the thought process and help Krapp to embark on a new beginning lead him instead to an end marked by the failure of being unable to record anything substantial about his life.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes with regard to temporality in *Phenomenology of Perception* that it is “the present” which “...enjoys a privilege because it is a zone in which being and consciousness coincide” (423–4). He further states that the “act of representation, unlike the experiences represented, is actual[ly] present” (492). He also states that “each present, in virtue of its very essence as a present, rules out the juxtaposition of other presents” and a certain period of the past can only be unfolded “anew according to its own *tempo*” (491). In the context of the play, the images of a certain present in the past do not and *cannot* have the same significance for the Krapp in the present. The present which has turned into past cannot be said to essentially have the same “tempo” when evoked to replace a present moment in the future (for it is “A late evening in the future”). That which is present to Krapp is the “act of representation” of the bygone moment, the moment itself cannot become the present. Since both our being and consciousness are subject to time, the unity of the two in the present-turned-past cannot exactly repeat itself in a given present in future. To Krapp, this unity can only be accessible as a representation of experiences in form of memory. Therefore, his endeavor to “Be again” can never be successful (Beckett 26). He can relive those experiences only by recalling them through the documented memory. The more he tries to belong to his previous self and events of life, the more distanced he finds himself from them. One of the reasons of Krapp turning silent also stems from the inability to connect and control time in a desirable way.

A phrase in the text which demonstrates the phenomenological condition of a person caught in the “ceaseless flux” (Chamarette 24) of time and one that brings the notions of temporality and subjectivity together is “Being--or remaining?” (Beckett 18). Krapp finds the string of words while looking for the meaning of the word “viduity” in the dictionary. The readers notice that he repeats the phrase in the form of a question and the two hyphens between “Being” and “or” adds to the effectivity of the phrase, compelling us to question “Being” and render emphasis to “remaining” instead. Both the words are significant because they put the three temporal denotations—that of past, present, and future—on the same plane. ‘Being’ as a verb is a condition of unfolding of existence. It implies duration. It is a process where present and future need to immediately and necessarily give way to past and present, respectively. Yet, for the meaning of the word to be conveyed, the three have to be seen existing together. Similarly, “remaining” is suggestive of that which is left of the whole, of the past which contains its larger segment, of the present and future in which the remaining *is* dissolving itself. However, the difference between the two is that while the former anticipates “prospection” of future, the latter brings retrospection in picture. Moreover, the two are inextricably related to one another for ‘Being’ is the present of all that has remained of the self but remaining is also the future of what the self is yet to become.

Similar to the case above, the expressions like “staring vacuously,” peering, etc., are implicitly connected with the idea of time and temporality. Motionlessness in the dynamics of the play is understood against the flow of time though stillness makes comprehension of the passage of time difficult. When we say that time necessarily brings about change, we intend to suggest that it is through change that time can be made sense of. Stillness is one of the conditions which does not make change visible. That is to say, that though the body necessarily experiences change and is affected by it, the change does not become obvious. By large, there emerges a case wherein the past, present, and future come together to exist with one another to cause stasis. The simultaneity of the three in the play is also reflected in the manner in which time engulfs Krapp into itself.⁴ At no moment in the play is Krapp mastering time. He is subjected to it and is unable to transcend its bounds.

The ‘being’ and becoming of the subject constantly happens despite the stasis indicated above. Krapp, in the play, is observed to be

⁴The tape and the watch are signifiers of time in the play.

communicating with his past. ‘Communicating’ because he does not simply listen to the recording, he reacts to them. For instance, he denies a familiarity with his younger self. He constantly pauses the tape at will and rewinds it to the section he finds fascinating. One notices that the events which were important to him in the past do not make sense to him in the present. The altering of his perspectives are markers of change. It is this very change, the consequence of time, which differentiates the irreducible and ephemeral unity of being and consciousness of a particular present from another moment in time. In the process of being and becoming, the stasis in the play cannot be equated to absolute stillness or death. At the same time death cannot be considered completely absent from the grounds of the text since, as Derrida suggests, to put a subject into language is to repress knowledge about it.⁵

It is in the image that the Beckettian subject comes to life. The reader understands the subjectivity of the character better through the lens of the image. By decoding the images that draw within their ambit the complex ideas of time and timelessness, one explores the language of silence and stasis which transcend the language of words and speech. Each pause in the play is figuratively a liminal space between expression and suppression which has a language and a duration of its own. If the pause makes time evident, it also seeks to arrest it; if it denotes the absence of word, it simultaneously reveals the presence of thought. It is indeed in spaces like these that one locates the Beckettian subject and it is due to the affectivity of image that such locations are made accessible.



⁵To reiterate, the paper employs the concept of image precisely to counter the repression caused by language and make visible that which the language hides.

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